

Job-skills program to aid at-risk youth

State grant to support juvenile offenders

Emily Sachs, Staff Writer

SAN BERNARDINO - It wasn't Miranda Sheffield's choice to become a foster child. And when she chose to give birth to a daughter at age 18, her forced independence was suddenly much more daunting.

The double-whammy might have led her far from where she is now were it not for a visit albeit reluctant to a Goodwill youth program in Pomona, where she asked for help and got it in spades.

At 20, after a series of classes and workshops and tutoring, she is working happily for the state as a full-time employment representative who reaches out to help young people in similar predicaments. She is also a community-college student and mother of 1-year-old Jayla.

Such circumstances and youthful indiscretions shouldn't be barriers to getting back on the right track, officials said Monday as they launched the new San Bernardino Youth Program, a job-training program at the Goodwill campus, 8120 Palm Lane.

"One of the things we have to tell our children is it is going to be a bumpy road. You are going to make mistakes," Assemblyman Joe Baca Jr., D-Rialto, told a crowd of Inland Empire dignitaries gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The program will operate for now as a two-year effort to guide 56 juvenile offenders with employment preparation, skill development and education assistance. It is funded by a \$246,400 grant from the San Bernardino County Workforce Development Department. Officials plan to expand to general and special-needs youth.

Baca said that when he worked as a probation officer, parents of juvenile offenders were constantly asking him what options they could give their children. Every new program is another resource to change their course, he said.

Even the seemingly hopeless.

Say, for instance, a youngster on probation with double convictions for selling drugs and who has a habit of sleeping until noon and listening to music all night. Why not consider working in sales for a business that has swing shifts?

The hypothetical scenario was a daily presence when San Bernardino Mayor Pat Morris was a Superior Court judge. He said he is pleased with Goodwill's suggestion.

"This is the way to start. Start with the assets you bring. You don't dwell on the past, you focus on the future," Morris said, noting that the program is just blocks from a 20-block section of the city "filled with hundreds of young people who need assistance."

The nearby Operation Phoenix area has been designated as a pilot program for crime reduction and self-improvement.

Also on Monday, the city opened the Phoenix Community Center, 1450 N. Waterman Ave., a resource and activity center for the public. Eighteen computers and a few pieces of furniture occupy the site now, and a trickling of youngsters showed up for its debut.

The Internet will be connected Friday, and within two months the building will be home to 14 agencies offering various services to the public, including an after-school program and a freshly planted athletic field.

"This center is going to make

a tremendous difference in the community," said Operation Phoenix director Glenn Baude. "We have too much

resources, energy and expertise at work for it not to work."

Two years ago, Nathaniel Brown of Pomona wasn't headed in the wrong direction so much as no direction, he said.

He went to school, but beyond that, stayed to himself and pretty much stayed home, sometimes tinkering with objects to see how they were built and how they worked.

When someone happened to mention a Goodwill program with job information, Nathaniel, now 17, went to check it out. He began going every day after school to hang out, take aptitude tests and attend personal-growth classes.

Nathaniel discovered that his interest in math and construction made him ideal for engineering. And suddenly school became more important.

"I did better this year. A lot better. I tried harder, just so I can get into college and do something with my life," he said. This fall he will start at Cal Poly Pomona where he plans to major in computer engineering. And he has a part-time job at Albertsons to help pay for it a position he found directly through Goodwill.

Sheffield said she had hefty doubts about the Goodwill program and several times thought it wasn't going to get her where she wanted to go. But she stayed with it, knowing that the options for at-risk young people, especially emancipating foster children, are slim-to-none.

She doesn't consider herself as having been at-risk, if only because she doesn't like labels and sees them as being only shades away from a pampered teen in a well-to-do suburb.

"The only difference is they need a little more attention, they need a little more discipline and they need a little more love," she said.

The new San Bernardino youth program is the second in Southern California to focus on probationers. Last year, an Arcadia program placed seven of its 54 probation clients in jobs. Goodwill officials called it a work in progress, but noted it has already placed seven of this year's 37 clients.

San Bernardino's program starts next week. Participants are selected on a referral basis by the county Probation Department.

It will be run in an office previously occupied by Goodwill's Career Resource Center, a related program that provides job leads, career guidance, workshops and Internet access free to the public. For information on either program, call (909) 885-3831.

Staff writer Robert Rogers contributed to this report.